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CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS MADE WITH PLANT MATERIALS

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Until the present age of machinery and plastics, most of the decorations used for the Christmas season were made from plant material, both fresh and dried. If you are tired of the uniformity of mass-produced items and have some extra time and a little patience, why not try making your own Christmas decorations this year?

Most of the plant material you will need can be picked up beside country roads or in abandoned fields. Get permission from the property owner to collect on his acreage. Also remember that most parks have regulations against taking anything from park property.

Always collect quite a bit more material than you think you will need. It is amazing how many cones, nuts, and seed capsules it takes to make even a small item. It is a good precaution to put all of the dry material you gather into a slow oven (about 150°) when you first bring it into the house. This will kill any insects or other animal life that may be hiding in it.

Most of the dried plant material should be wired so that it can be firmly attached to the frame. This is the most time-consuming part of the operation. To wire: Run a wire through or around the item, bring the ends of the wire together and twist them around each other a few times to keep the wire in place. Leave the ends several inches long. Place the items in position on the frame and wrap the ends of the wire around the frame several times to keep the item firmly in position. Any excess wire may then be clipped off.

To store decorations made with dried plant material, place in a plastic bag and a few moth balls. This will discourage small wildlife from making the decoration their happy home during the year.

PLANT MATERIAL NEEDED:

Cones: For tailored wreaths, you will need cones that are as uniform in size and shape as possible. For free-form wreaths, collect as many different sizes as possible from the tiny hemlock ones to the mammoth long-leaf pine cones.

It is best to gather cones after the scales have fully opened out. The scales close up again if the cone becomes wet, but all that is necessary to get them to open out again quickly is to place them in a warm oven (about 150°) for a few hours. When wiring a cone, slip the wire between the scales so that the wire is hidden from sight or shows as

little as possible. The wire can be placed under the scales at the bottom, middle, or top of the cone, depending on your design. Cones are attractive used right-side-up, sideways, or upside-down. Large cones may need to have a wire on either side to hold them securely in place. Many cones are too large to be used in an arrangement, but if the bottom part is cut off and turned upside-down, it forms an attractive rosette that can easily be fitted into an arrangement.

Acorns and Nuts: Acorn nuts pop out of their cups when they get to a certain stage of dryness. Pick up both the nuts and the cups under a given tree -- you can sort out which nut fits which cup later at your leisure. Keep different types of acorns in different bags, though, so you will be sure that the nut and the cup match each other.

There are two ways to wire acorns. (1) Drill a hole through the base of the nut and a hole through the center of the cup. Run a wire through the nut, then run both ends of the wire through the hole in the cup. (2) Drill two holes in the cup, run a wire through them and then glue the nut into the cup.

Large acorns can be used individually, but small ones make more of a show if they are clustered into groups.

Walnuts, pecans, and other decorative nuts can be wired by drilling a hole through them and running a wire through the hole.

Seed Capsules: Any attractive, reasonably sturdy seed pods or capsules can be used. A few suggestions -- seed capsules of sweet gum, sycamore, yucca, eucalyptus, buttonbush, Chinese dogwood, and southern magnolia. If the pod has a stem that is rigid and does not break away with a healthy tug, attach the wire to the stem. If it is stemless, figure out some way to drill or poke a hole through it so it can be securely wired. You are not planning on playing football with the arrangement when it is finished, but neither do you want to have it shedding bits and pieces over the house during the holidays.

Greens: Branches of any plant that you have access to and that has green leaves on it in December can be used for greenery. Try to cut the branches just before you need to use them so they will hold up as long as possible. If you must cut them quite a while in advance, keep the branches in water until you are ready to work with them.

PURCHASED ITEMS: Although the visible part of your decoration will consist mostly of plant material, you will need a few items from the store.

Frames for Wreaths: You can experiment making wreath frames at home, using either wood or wire. Just be sure that they are very sturdy so that the weight of the plant material will not bend them out of shape. A quick and easy method of making a small frame is to bend a wire coat hanger into a circle. If you leave the hook on, you will have a built-in

hanger when the wreath is finished. Ready-made wire frames are sold in flower shops. They are quite inexpensive and are available in different sizes.

Wire: Florist's wire is the easiest to work with, but try to avoid buying the ready-cut 12" and 18" lengths as they are quite expensive. The same type of wire is available in rolls at a fraction of the cost. If your florist does not carry it, check with a florists' supply house, a craft shop, or a hardware store. If florist's wire as such is not available, you will have to use some other kind. What you want is a light-weight wire that bends easily and that will stay bent when and where you bend it. You will have enough other problems without having the wire you are using fight back at you.

Wire-cutter: An inexpensive pair can be purchased at either the hardware store or the florists' supply house.

Electric Drill: If you do not have a drill already, invest in an inexpensive one if you plan to use acorns and nuts. If you use a very small bit and place the holes correctly, the wire will not be visible on the finished arrangement.

Florist's Tape: For an arrangement in which you want to display cones or nuts on a "stem", wrap the wire with florist's tape to make it more attractive. The tape is slightly gummy. It will stay in place only if it is stretched tightly around the wire.

Plastic Foam: Pre-cut shapes in cone, ball, and wreath form can be purchased at most dime stores. Plastic foam is easy to work with, but arrangements using it for a base will be more fragile than those on a wire or wood base. Before placing an item on the foam form, be sure it is in the position you want. Once a hole has been made in the foam, it remains a hole. If you shift the material around too often, you will soon have nothing but space to put it on.

If you want to color the plastic foam, make sure that the paint you use is made for that purpose. Some paints have an ingredient that dissolves styrofoam upon contact.

Glue: Any all-purpose glue that is clear-colored when it dries is suitable.

Added Plant Material: If you have not been able to collect a large enough variety of material, buy a few items to add interest. Gift, craft, and florist shops usually carry a selection of dried plant material. Nuts in their shells can be purchased at the grocery store.

SUGGESTED ARRANGEMENTS: There is not room here to give step-by-step directions on how to put these arrangements together. These are just general suggestions on the type of materials to be used and hints on how to overcome some of the problems you will encounter.

Wreaths: Tailored wreaths can be made using only two types of cones with, perhaps, a red ribbon bow for an accent. However, the more interesting and unusual wreaths are made by using up to 20 different types of dried plant material. Exactly what you use will vary widely, depending on what section of the country you live in.

Draw an outline of the wreath frame on a piece of paper. Arrange your material loosely on the sheet of paper to get an idea of what it will look like once it is wired to the frame. Start by placing your largest or most spectacular specimens equidistant around the circle to form 3, 5, or 7 focal points. Then fill in the areas in between with the smaller items. When you are satisfied with the general arrangement, start wiring the material onto the frame in the same sequence. Be sure that each piece is wired on tightly so that it will not rattle around. You will need more material on the frame than you had on the sheet of paper because it will bunch up more closely when it is wired than when it was loose.

Christmas Tree: For this you will need medium-sized to tiny cones, nuts, and pods. Wild rose hips, sumac berries, evening primrose capsules, hemlock cones, and pistachio nuts are some suggestions for the smaller items.

Start with a conical styrofoam form and work from top to bottom or vice versa, whichever suits you better. You will not have to do as much wiring for this as for the wreath because the stems on much of the material will be sufficient to hold them to the foam. Put the large items towards the bottom and the smaller towards the top.

Poinsettia: Run a wire through the wide ends of opened milkweed pods, preferably ones that still have the center divider in them. Take 6 wired pods and twist the wires together so that the pods form a rosette. Spray all over with red paint. Wire the sweet gum (or similar seed capsule), paint it gold, and place it in the center of the rosette.

Two suggestions on using poinsettias: (1) Attach a sturdy, long wire to the flower, wrap the wire with florist's tape, and place several flowers in a vase of fresh greens. (2) Attach poinsettias to a wreath of fresh greens.

Gum Ball Tree: For this you need a sturdy branch of a tree or shrub that has sturdy thorns on it. Get either one nicely-shaped branch or use several together. Hard orange, pyracantha, and hawthorn are some suggestions. Anchor the branches firmly into a decorative bowl or clay pot and then stick gum drops on each thorn. A tree of different-colored gums drops is usually more enticing than all-of-a-color ones.

Boxwood Tree: Make the "skeleton" of the tree with a straight twig or dowel (for the trunk) stuck into a styrofoam ball. Anchor this upright into a container. Cut twigs of boxwood (Japanese holly or yew are good substitutes) of a uniform length (usually 3" to 6") and stick them into the ball until it is completely covered. Decorate with your favorite tiny ornaments.

Centerpieces: Here are 2 good ways to use the plastic containers that strawberries and cherry tomatoes come in. (1) Wire nuts and cones to the 4 sides, place a candle in the middle of the container and then fill it with nuts and cones. (2) Place the container bottom-side up. Cut out the center squares to make a hole large enough for a candle to go through. Cut strips of newspaper about 3/4-inch wide and 9"long. Twist these into loops, pinch in the bottom end and insert through the squares. Cover the container completely, glue small cones and nuts here and there, spray with gold paint. When the paint is dry, insert the candle in the center hole.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS:

Corsages of tiny cones and nuts.

Wreath made entirely from wild rose hips. The hips shrink somewhat but keep their color well. Looks very nice against a background wreath of greens.

"Creatures of the Woods" made with cones, nuts, pipe cleaners, and a great deal of imagination.

Sumac Seed Clusters used for red accent in a wreath or vase of greens.

Miniature Tree made from a single large cone. Insert tiny Christmas balls between the scales. Glue on the "trunk" made of a narrow bottle cap.

A CHRISTMAS TREE THAT LIVES FOR YEARS

In these ecology-mined times, many homeowners are turning to live Christmas trees. You can join this group and enjoy your tree for years if you follow a few simple rules.

Get recommendations from your local nursery for varieties suitable for your area. Some of the more popular choices for a "living" Christmas tree are Scotch pine, Douglas fir, balsam fir, blue spruce, black spruce, and Eastern red cedar. Be sure you have space in your grounds to accommodate a growing tree of the kind you select.

Proper handling is important if you want your tree to survive for outdoor planting.

1. Buy a tree that is balled-in-burlap, and one that is not too big to handle easily.
2. If possible, prepare the hole in advance when the ground is easy to dig. Dig it at least half again as big as the rootball. Keep the hole from freezing by lining it with straw, or other insulation.
3. Move the tree indoors gradually -- to garage or sheltered area outside, to basement, and finally to the room where it will be displayed.
4. Keep it there no more than a week, out of direct sunlight, and away from radiators or heat vents.
5. Big lights can damage your tree. Use only miniature lights.
6. Water it, but only enough to keep the rootball from drying. Too much water, coupled with indoor warmth, may encourage new growth, which would suffer winter damage when moved outdoors.
7. After you have enjoyed the tree for the holidays, reverse the procedure and take it outside gradually.

If you live in a severe climate, you may want to hold the tree in the garage for the winter, and set it out in the spring. If so, keep it in the dark, and give it a little water occasionally. If the weather is mild and you set it out directly after the holidays, water when you have periods of warm weather. Spraying with a transpirant, or wilt deterrent, will help hold moisture in the needles. (Do not use on blue spruce as it will turn the color of the needles.)

In transplanting, follow the general directions for resetting evergreens. You can get instructions from your county agricultural agent or local nurseryman.

